

of the secular lords, and under the Burgundian dukes—Charles the Bold especially—they were compelled to suffer the diminution of both their wealth and their privileges for the benefit of the State. The reaction against clerical power and abuse is, too, very observable in the growth of religious associations, heretic and non-heretic—Waldensians, Beghards, Beguines, Fraticelli, Lollards, Brothers and Sisters of the Free Spirit, Sec. These were more or less unsound in the faith, and drew down on themselves the bitterest persecution on the part of the official clergy. Their enemies give them a bad character as well for evil practices. They were, or became at any rate, hostile to the official Church as well as the orthodox theology, and it would not be surprising if, in an age of gross superstition and crass popular ignorance, some of them should have swerved into fanatic extremes of self-indulgence as revolting as their detractors assert. Certain it seems that they laid stress on the religion of the spirit rather than of the letter, and their existence is of interest to us as showing the tendency to revolt against a traditional system of belief and rite too strong for even the tremendous penalties attached to nonconformity to check. Nor was the mystic tendency in opposition to the dominant formalism all of the type of the Brethren of the Free Spirit. In men like John Ruysbroek it rose in pure flight to the infinite, sought communion with God through the heart and the imagination rather than the senses. And in Gerhard Groote and Florentius, whom Ruysbroek powerfully influenced, this contemplative spirit was combined with a practical activity which found its noble expression in the Fraternity of the Common Life. The Brotherhood, which Groote and Florentius founded at Deventer, and which expanded into numerous branch communities in the Netherlands and Western Germany, was no strictly ecclesiastical order. It was a voluntary association of pious men and women, who took no vows and did not separate themselves from the world, but worked with their hands, or taught in the schools which they founded, or wrote devotional books, or gave themselves up to works of charity or mercy, none the less zealously on that account. The schools at Deventer, Zwolle, Hertogenbosch, and other places were among the most famous educational institutions of the age.